

Transportation

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PUB. Living Lore in New England

(Connecticut)

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WRITER Francis Donovan

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"Living Lore" Series

Francis Donovan, Thomaston, Connecticut

January 5, 1939 TRANSPORTATION

Mr. Botsford has rigged up an ingenious contrivance for his radio. It consists of a long rod attached to the tuning dial by means of which he can sit in his Morris chair and change

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stations as he pleases without rising, and for his greater convenience he has added a magnifying glass through which the dial numbers are easily discernible.

"Know where I got that glass?" he asks. "That's my old bicycle lamp. You can find a use for everything, sooner or later, if you hang on to it. Who'd have thought I'd ever want that old lamp again? But you never can tell.

I had a lot of fun on that old bicycle. Guess I told you about some of the trips I took didn't I? When I got through with that bike I sat down and figured up my mileage, and I found out that I'd been clear around the world, if I'd gone in a straight line.

"Yessir, I'd been over twenty-five thousand miles. Went over three hundred and sixty-five miles one week. Never did a century run, though I could've, easy as not. Some fellers used to see how many of them they could run up. A great trip was up to Springfield and back. That's fifty miles each way. You were supposed to make it same day, of course.

"I got out the shop one day at four o'clock. At twenty-six minutes after, I was down in Dexter's drug store in Waterbury, drinkin' a sody. How's that for scorchin'?

"Lots of fellers used to try to make Plymouth hill, that 2 used to be an awful steep hill before the new bridge went in. I remember tryin' it once. They was an Uncle Tom show comin' down, and all the bloodhounds they used to have for chasin' Eliza across the ice was runnin' loose.

"Soon's they saw me comin' on the wheel they made a beeline for me. I got off in a hurry. Feller drivin' the wagon says 'Don't worry, they won't hurt you.' Well, they didn't, but how the hell was I to know? They spoiled my try for the hill, anyway. But two or three of them in town used to make it.

"There was a feller used to come down from Torrington was one of the best riders I ever see. He'd come down and ride around in circles over by the depot till the evenin' train

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came in. Then he'd wave at the engineer and say, 'See you in Torrington.' And by God, he would, too.

"They used to make the 'Eagle' (bicycle) up in Torrington. That had the big wheel in back and a small one in front.

"Back in 'ninety-three I was down in Washington, D.C., time they had the convention of the League of American Wheelmen. They was three-four fellers stayin' in the same hotel with me from Springfield, had those Eagle wheels.

"One mornin' they got an old tomato can and got out in the street in front of the hotel and batted that thing around with their wheels just like they were playin' polo. Boy, I tell you they was good at it. They'd practiced it to home, you see. They had a crowd of people around watchin' 'em before they got through.

"Some people here in town had them Eagles; others had the ones with the big wheel in front. I remember one lad, I'm not 3 goin' to tell you his name. He used to get so drunk he couldn't stand on his feet, but put him on a wheel and he'd ride as straight as you please.

"Of course if he hit a bump he was apt to go tail over spindle buggy and when he fell off, he couldn't get up. Somebody had to help him on the wheel again, then he was all right.

"I see some of them take some nasty falls. Roads was pretty bad in them days, and it paid to use brakes comin' down a hill. Bidwell's hill was one of the worst. It was sandy as hell at the bottom, and when you hit that sand you was apt to go right over the handle bars.

"I come down there with a feller from Naugatuck one time, a new rider, I told him he better use his brake, but he said no, he didn't want to. He hit the sand and off he went tail over spindle buggy. Him and the wheel landed over in the bushes. Front wheel just crumpled up like paper. I pulled him out and he was groanin' and cussin'. Had a busted arm, I got him down to the nearest house and they went for the doctor.

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"Great times, great times, on the bicycles. Then the automobiles come along. Of course it was a long time before everybody got to ownin' them too. Most any one could have a bicycle. I remember when they was seventy five of them over in the sheds by the Marine shop every day.

"But automobiles was a different proposition. Jack Coates used to have a job testin' em for the Pope Hartford Company. He used to ride 'em all over the state. They'd tell him how many miles to go and they didn't care where he went. He'd just rig up an old seat on the chassis and start out, no windshield or 4 or nothin', and come back when he got the mileage made up.

"That's how I got my first and fastest auto ride. I was goin' to Springfield and I was hikin' along over towards Terryville to get the trolley and Jack come along and I flagged him. I was late. I says, 'Jack, can we make the trolley,' and he says, 'Sure,' and how we did fly. We made it all right.

"The different cars they used to be. I used to keep a list of 'em. There was the Pope Hartford, and the Stevens Duryea, and the Locomobile, and the Peerless and the National, and the Saxon, and the Metz--I can't remember them all.

"Billy Gilbert, that used to live next to me here, he had a Stanley Steamer. He was an engineer. He's out in Californy now. Spent all his life on the railroads and he swore by steam. Wouldn't have a gasoline engine.

"After he moved to Californy he wrote me a letter. Said there was a big hill out there beyond San Francisco nine miles long. Said ten tow cars was kept busy on that hill all the time. But that steamer of his just ate it up.

"You'd ought to be able to remember when they used Plymouth Hill for testin' cars. It was quite a trick for a car to go over there in high. Good many of 'em would start off in high,

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then shift to second, then low, then they'd get stuck. But it's a damn poor car that won't go over in high these days. Man wouldn't buy a car that wouldn't make it in high.

“Well, I got to go down town, but I ain't goin' to give you 5 no lift today. I'm not goin' to take the car out, I feel as though the walk will do me good. So you just wait till I put the cat out and fix my fires and we'll walk down together.”

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